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Cinematic Pedagogy for Sustainable Development: A Humanistic and Subaltern Lens on Higher Education through Selected Bollywood Movies

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Abstract:

Indian movies have frequently explored education as an important social foundation that influences individual identity and human values. This paper presents a humanistic analysis of education as depicted in selected Indian movies such *as Taare Zameen Par (2007), 3 Idiots (2009), Stanley Ka Dabba (2011), and Hichki (2018).* Considering Bollywood movies as a cultural text, the study analyses how these movies resist stiff educational systems, which are performance-driven and show inclusivity, creativity, and individuality. Using the lens of Humanism, Cultural Studies, and Subaltern Studies, the paper affirms that Indian movies on education build a counter-narrative to institutional authority by focusing on the pride and emotional well-being of students. The study emphasises how these stories challenge traditional definitions of intelligence and achievement, thereby redefining education as a moral and human-centred and inclusive process rather than a purely rigid one. By studying Indian movies with a literary and cultural studies perspective, the paper contributes to narratives on the educational system, human values, and social transformation.

Keywords: Taare Zameen Par, 3 Idiots, Stanley Ka Dabba, Hichki, inclusivity, humanism, education, human values, cultural studies, Subaltern Studies

Introduction:

Higher education works as a key part of sustainable development by equipping individuals to promote economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. The world's emphasis on Sustainable Development Goal 4, i.e., Quality Education, emphasises the need for an inclusive and equitable education system that helps lifelong learning for everyone.

The traditional education system often prioritises standard assessments, a competitive environment, and rigid pedagogy. Such approaches frequently ignore creativity, emotional well-being, and diversity of learners. In response to this, cinematic pedagogy has flourished as an innovative educational strategy that combines films into academic discourse to promote critical communication with important social issues.

Indian cinema, mainly Bollywood, has consistently highlighted education as a site of resistance, reform, and transformation. Films such as Taare Zameen Par, 3 Idiots, Stanley Ka Dabba, and Hichki break institutional limitations while promoting humanistic and inclusive approaches to learning. This paper studies these films to understand how cinema can contribute to sustainable and human-centred education.

The theory of Subaltern Studies provides a critical framework to comprehend how marginalised voices are ignored by dominant ones (Guha, 1982). When combined with humanistic education and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), it helps in a detailed exploration of inclusivity in education.

Theoretical Framework:

Humanistic education focuses on the holistic development of students by stressing emotional well-being, self-actualisation, and creativity. According to Rogers (1969), meaningful learning happens when students are active and emotionally bonded to the process of learning, while Maslow (1943) puts forward the

importance of psychological needs for effective growth. In contrast to traditionally rigid and standard systems, humanistic education focuses on learner-centred approaches which consider individual differences. Subaltern Studies shows how the marginalised groups are suppressed and ignored. Guha (1982) puts the subaltern as groups whose voices are oppressed within dominant hegemonic systems, while Spivak (1988) asks an important question, whether the subaltern can truly "speak" or their voices are always silenced through dominant systems. In the educational context, subalterns include students with poor economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and those from suppressed social backgrounds.
Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) highlights inclusive, equitable, and quality education that empowers people to contribute to a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2017). It combines social, economic, and environmental fronts of development, with a major focus on equity and social justice. Cinematic pedagogy, which is discussed by Giroux (2002), uses movies as cultural texts to interact with learners critically, which promotes empathy and awareness towards social issues. All these theories provide a comprehensive lens to analyse education through cinema.

Methodology:

This study uses a qualitative research design which studies the representation of education in selected Bollywood films. It uses humanistic education, Subaltern Studies, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to analyse the movies. The research also uses textual analysis, taking movies as cultural texts that reflect educational systems, inequalities in society, and marginalised groups. A purposive sampling is used to select four films, *Taare Zameen Par (2007), 3 Idiots (2009), Stanley Ka Dabba (2011), and Hichki (2018)*, which are based on their theme that focus on education and the representation of marginalised or subaltern groups of learners. These movies collectively show different types of exclusion which includes, learning disabilities, poor economic background, institutional pressure, and social inequities. The process involves watching the movies multiple times, followed by focused analysis of important scenes, dialogues, and characters. These are interpreted through the lens of the theoretical frameworks to interpret how educational systems are represented. Major attention is given to the formation of subaltern identities, and to what extent they are given agency, and whether the movies challenge or resist dominant educational ideologies. This in-depth qualitative analysis helps to understand the representation of education but is limited to the selected movies.

Analysis of the Selected Movies:

Taare Zameen Par (2007) offers an important critique of the education system by showing the lived experiences of Ishaan Awasthi, a kid with dyslexia who is marginalised by the performance-driven education system. The film shows how the dominant educational system, based on standard format, competition, and measurable outcomes, ignores creativity, individuality, and empathy. Through this story, the movie not only challenges traditional pedagogies but also introduces education through a humanistic, subaltern, and sustainability-oriented approach.
As we see from the lens of Subaltern Studies, Ishaan represents a subaltern student whose voice is suppressed within a dominant educational institute. Subaltern, as put forward by Guha (1982), refers to groups that are marginalized, socially, politically, and culturally, and whose voices are suppressed by the dominant system.
In this context, Ishaan's dyslexia excludes him from the norms of acceptable intelligence, making him invisible within a dominant system that ignores diversity. He fails multiple times in the movie, which results in punishments and eventual alienation in the dominant system. His silence and inability to express his struggle and opinion are examples of subalternity in a hegemonic system.
Spivak's (1988) essay, "Can the subaltern speak?", helps to understand this better. The movie attempts to show the struggle of the child and also tries to become the voice of many more who face this struggle. In the movie, the struggle of the child is understood by his teacher, played by Amir Khan, who mediates and empowers him to learn and express his voice in the dominant discourse.
From a humanistic lens, the movie strongly shows a student-centred approach to education that gives priority to self-expression, emotional well-being, and creativity. Rogers (1969) highlights the importance of creating a friendly and empathetic learning environment where students feel heard and understood.

Maslow's (1943) need hierarchy says that psychological and emotional security are necessary for effective learning. Initially, Ishan's experience in the movie shows fear, humiliation and alienation, which shows the absence of empathy and a supportive environment. His academic failures are not only because of dyslexia but also because of a lack of a supportive environment.

The introduction of a teacher named Nikumbh in the movie makes a sudden change in the teaching style. Instead of using the authoritarian approach, which relies on punishment and a standardised system, he adopts an individualised approach that understands Ishan's unique skills. By supporting Ishan's artistic skills and appreciating his experiences, he creates an empathetic and supportive learning environment. This transformation is an example of the huge potential of humanistic education, which challenges the rigid system and promotes inclusivity.

Thus, the movie shows that education is a process that nurtures creativity in the learners rather than limiting them to standard norms.

With the lens of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), Taare Zameen Par promotes inclusivity, equity, and quality education as put forward by UNESCO (2017). ESD stresses the necessity for the education system to cater to diverse learner needs and promote social well-being and equality. By showing the different neurodiverse learners, the movie highlights the need for an inclusive system that accommodates these diverse learners. It challenges the rigid one-for-all system and promotes a more inclusive, friendly and flexible system that will contribute to sustainable development.

Despite its progressive message, the movie shows an individual teacher who is showing empathy, which is a limitation, as only Ishan's problem is solved. The film does not show an entire system which helps the inclusion of students with such difficulty. But to some level, it motivates us to develop such systems to attain sustainability.

Thus, Taare Zameen Par provides a multi-lensed critique of the educational system by combining humanistic, subaltern, and sustainability approaches. It emphasises the suppression and marginalisation of neurodiverse learners, challenges dominant pedagogical systems, and promotes inclusive and empathetic approaches to education.

On the other hand, it shows the complex nature of representing subaltern voices in the mainstream cinema, where empowerment is often mediated through a dominant system bearer. As a tool of cinematic pedagogy, the movie holds high potential to promote a sustainable and inclusive education system.

3 Idiots (2009) sharply criticises the higher education system. Specifically, it highlights rote learning, competitive environment and hierarchy in institutions. It is set in an Engineering college where students are pressurised to meet the expectations of the society and the norms of success put forward by society. Through the story, the movie questions the dominant educational system and puts learning as a process which involves and promotes curiosity, creativity, and personal satisfaction. When analysed using the lens of Subaltern Studies, humanistic education, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the film gives deeper insights into the inequalities and limitations of the current higher education system.

From the lens of subaltern studies, the students in 3 Idiots (2009) can be seen as entities that are suppressed by a hegemonic educational system that gives priority to conformity over individuality. Subalternity, as explained by Guha (1982), refers to groups that are suppressed within dominant systems and whose voices are often ignored by mainstream discourse. In this movie, characters such as Farhan and Raju are seen as subalterns as they are suppressed by the dominant society and are pressurised by family and the dominant educational framework, which has defined success based on ranks and hierarchy. Rancho, the third character, is seen as a figure of resistance who opposes these norms by redefining success and the purpose of education. he focuses on understanding rather than rote learning, which represents a counter-hegemonic stand that challenges institutional authority (Guha, 1982).

However, Rancho is an intellectually gifted character and is shown to be intelligent from the start of the movie. He resists the dominant system as he has intellectual capital, but the voice is limited to him, which may question that the voices of students whose intellectual capital is comparatively less are still suppressed by the dominant definition of success. Still, the movie promotes redefining success for each individual, challenging the conformity to dominant societal norms.

From the humanistic lens, 3 Idiots (2009) strongly supports learner-centred education that promotes internal motivation, creativity, and emotional well-being. As Rogers (1969) says, meaningful learning occurs when

students are actively engaged, self-supported, and nurtured in a positive learning environment. Similarly, Maslow's (1943) need hierarchy highlights that psychological security and self-esteem are very important for effective learning. This shows the consequences of ignoring these principles through the intense stress and anxiety that are experienced by the learners. An example of this is the death of Joy Lobo, a student who was not able to bear the academic pressure. This shows the side of education which is mainly performance-driven rather than empathetic.

Rancho, on the other hand, follows the humanistic approach to education. He motivates his peers to enjoy learning and succeed in whatever they enjoy. He also promotes creativity and curiosity as seen in a school which he opens in the second half of the movie. This transformation is an example of shifting from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach, where education is seen as a process of holistic development rather than confirmed academic success (Rogers, 1969).

From the lens of Education for Sustainable Development, 3 Idiots (2009) emphasises the need for an education system which promotes creative thinking, innovation, and practical skills relevant to real-world issues. ESD highlights the nurturing of skills that enable individuals to contribute to a sustainable future for the world. the skills such as problem-solving, social responsibility, and creativity (UNESCO, 2017). The movie promotes sustainable development through the character of Rancho, who promotes creativity, innovation and solves problems which help in sustainable development.

Raju's economic background limits his ability to succeed in the existing academic norms. The pressure of success makes him tensed and he fears failing as his family has high hopes for him. Raju is seen as a subaltern, as his voice is suppressed because of his poor financial condition. He is marginalised by a society where inequality persists, and the dominant have an upper hand and a stress-free life to focus on and succeed without any financial pressure.

Thus, 3 Idiots (2009) critiques higher education by combining humanistic, subaltern, and sustainability approaches. It emphasises the limitations of traditional educational systems and promotes an inclusive and meaningful approach to learning. The film gives insights into the possibilities and limitations of reforming higher education into a more inclusive and sustainable system.

Stanley Ka Dabba (2011) is a story of a school child who is financially poor and faces various challenges to take education the moive give deeper insights in subaltern studies, humanistic education and sustainable development.

From the lens of subaltern studies, Stanley, a school-going boy, is financially poor and faces various challenges in taking education because of that. His poor background makes it very difficult to fulfil his basic educational needs. His basic need for food is not fulfilled, as there is no one to provide him with a lunchbox. This becomes the reason for his alienation and exclusion from the group of children carrying and sharing food during the lunch break.

Spivak (1988) says that the subaltern cannot easily "speak" within the dominant system, which is relevant in this movie. Stanley's character is mostly silent. He does not openly tell his struggles, nor is he given a chance to tell his struggles. Instead, his identity is understood by others' perspective, where teachers form a rule to bring lunch instead of knowing the reason for his not bringing it. This shows how subalterns are often misrepresented by others rather than allowed to represent themselves, which marginalises them in the dominant system. Thus, the movie shows that the voices of subalterns are suppressed in the dominant system.

From the humanistic lens, *Stanley Ka Dabba (2011)* highlights the emotional and psychological side of learning. It emphasises the importance of empathy and emotional care in the education system. Humanistic education, as explained by Rogers (1969), promotes a learner-centred approach that focuses on the holistic development of students, which includes their emotional and social well-being. Maslow (1943) emphasises basic needs, such as food and the psychological impact of it on Stanley, must be fulfilled before higher-level learning. Stanley's situation directly relates to this principle, as his lack of food limits his ability to engage with the learning process. The film thus criticises an education system that ignores the basic needs of students, taking learning as an academic activity that is detached from other realities.

The character of a teacher who punishes Stanley for not carrying a lunchbox shows the absence of empathy in the movie and the educational system. Rather than knowing the reason for his not carrying lunch, he is punished and alienated, and the rigid rules are formed. On the other hand, the scenes of kindness by peers show empathy and a potential learning environment.

From the lens of Education for Sustainable Development, Stanley Ka Dabba (2011) states the importance of social equity and justice as basic elements of sustainable education. ESD highlights the need to create inclusive educational systems that eradicate inequalities and ensure that all learners have access to quality education (UNESCO, 2017). The movie shows how socio-economic differences can create barriers to participation and inclusion, which undermines the goal of equitable education. By highlighting poverty and exclusion because of that, the movie tries to eradicate the inequality and create a sustainable and inclusive education system.

Thus, *Stanley Ka Dabba (2011)* gives a detailed relationship between poverty and education. Through its representation of subalterns and the silenced, it highlights the inequalities in the system, it challenges the dominant system. By combining humanistic and sustainability perspectives, the movie highlights the importance of empathy, equity, and social justice in education.

Hichki (2018) represents inclusion and marginalisation within the educational system through the story of Naina Mathur, who is a teacher with Tourette's Syndrome, and her students are from a poor economic background. The movie deals with issues of discrimination and access to education, which criticises the rigid education system. When applying theories of Subaltern Studies, humanistic education, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the movie shows both the positives and limitations of an inclusive approach.

From the lens of subaltern studies, both Naina and her students are marginalised by the dominant educational system. Subaltern, as explained by Guha (1982), refers to those ignored dominant power structures and those whose voices are silenced. Naina is a disabled teacher, and her students are from a poor economic background. Both of them are subalterns as they are suppressed and alienated in the dominant system. The students with a poor background are taught in a separate class, and they are treated as different from the mainstream students in the school.

As Spivak (1988) says, the subaltern in the film struggles to “speak” within a dominant narrative, as both Naina and her students have to prove their worth within a biased educational system, rather than being accepted as they are.

From the lens of humanistic education, *Hichki (2018)* shows the importance of empathy and a student-centred approach. Humanistic education promotes understanding the individual potential of each learner and creating an environment which supports emotional and psychological growth (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1943). Naina's teaching approach is humanistic as she understands the economic background of the students and then starts teaching them, which helps her transform the attitude and future of the students. This is an example of learning that needs empathy.

From the lens of Education for Sustainable Development, the film highlights the principles of inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2017). It shows the importance of providing equal opportunities to all students, regardless of their economic background or physical disabilities. The movie challenges discrimination and promotes inclusivity, which contribute to sustainable development.

Thus, *Hichki (2018)* gives a meaningful review of disability, marginalisation, and inclusion in the education system. By combining humanistic and subaltern perspectives, the movie emphasises the challenges that marginalised groups face. It promotes Inclusivity and equality, leading to holistic and sustainable development.

Conclusion:

This study analysed selected Bollywood movies, *Taare Zameen Par (2007), 3 Idiots (2009), Stanley Ka Dabba (2011), and Hichki (2018)* to put forward how cinema represents the issues of education, marginalisation, and sustainability through the lenses of humanistic education, Subaltern Studies, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The study highlights that these movies collectively criticise the dominant education system that gives priority to standardisation and competition, at the cost of inclusivity, creativity, and empathy.

From a subaltern lens, the films put forward the experiences of suppressed and marginalised students, including neurodiverse students, economically poor children, and individuals facing social discrimination. The characters represent groups whose voices are silenced by the dominant educational framework, which reflects the inequality in the educational system (Guha, 1982). On the other hand, the analysis shows that

while these movies try to give voice to subaltern experiences, such representation is frequently done through dominant characters or narratives, aligning with Spivak's (1988) theory that the subalterns cannot easily "speak" within a dominant hegemonic system.

From a humanistic lens, the movies strongly promote student-centered and empathetic perspective to education. They highlight the importance of understanding individual creativity, showing emotional and psychological needs, and promoting supportive learning environments (Rogers, 1969; Maslow, 1943). These approaches challenge the traditional pedagogical practises and emphasise the reforming role of educators in developing an inclusive environment for learning. The stories are examples where empathy leads to growth and learning.

From the Education for Sustainable Development lens, the films deal with the elements of inclusivity, equity, and quality education as important components of sustainable development (UNESCO, 2017). By dealing with issues such as inequality and exclusion, they highlight the need for an education system which is responsive to diverse learners' needs.

Overall, this paper shows the potential of cinema as a pedagogical tool for dealing with complex educational and social problems. Movies not only are a mirror of society but also are spaces to discuss the development that society needs. In conclusion, combining humanistic and subaltern perspectives within the narrative of sustainable education is necessary for developing an inclusive, equitable, and reforming education system.

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